CHRISTMAS

By Valentine Long, O.F.M.

10¢

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PATERSON NEW JERSEY

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By
Valentine
Long
O.F.M.

St. Anthony's Guild
Paterson, N. J.

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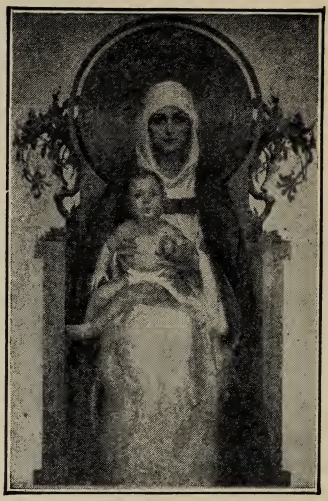
To

My Dear Departed Mother

From Whom I First Heard

So Unforgettably

Of God's



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Motherhood had met the kiss of Divinity, and would henceforth wear a luster not all its own. It would still know the curse which Eve had brought upon it; but it would share in the emanation, the spiritual glow, that touched the figure of Mary from the Divine Babe.

CHRISTMAS

BEFORE ever there was a mother on earth, the divine promise of one was announced over the ruins of a lost paradise. Satan had just made a fool of the only woman in existence — when God had a word to say. If through Eve such havoc had been wrought, the Almighty would show hell that through a woman it could be undone: a woman so glorious that the highest angels in heaven would deem it a privilege, feel it a joy, to bow before her queenly and unutterable loveliness.

God Tells Satan

Said the Almighty to the evil spirit hiding there among the blossoms in the form of a serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed." Here, to be sure, was bad news for hell, putting its late victory over man up against an omnipotent threat. Here, too,

was the cue to inspire the future, when many a picture would glow, many a poem aspire, many a statue rise, as best they could, to the glory of a single vision: that of the Immaculate trampling, under a firm but delicate foot, the fanged and ugly symbol of evil. Here was already, at that early date, a "Merry Christmas" to the world from its Creator; and the Birth that would draw from the skies a serenade of the brightest music ever heard on earth, only wanted the appointed hour.

In the Eternal Mind, as she was the Virgin of virgins, so Mary was the first of mothers. Never did the Creator tire of proclaiming her destiny. He repeated His promise of a Saviour to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to David; and always the tenderness and sublimity of motherhood shone through the divine utterance. The patriarchs were given infallible assurance that from their line would flower the maid whose beauty would enshrine "the Holy One," "the Expectation of the Nations," "the Messias," "the Lord, our Just One," "the Christ." One after another, the inspired writers hailed the Mother who was, by hundreds of years, not yet an infant herself.

Fittingly she came to be known as "the Rose of Sharon." Her sweetness enriched prophecy after prophecy, lent delight to every detail that told beforehand of her Child. Micheas in the face of proud Jerusalem said the birth of Mary's Child would take place at "little" Bethlehem; Daniel from a distance of centuries picked the exact time; Balaam for his part predicted the very star the Magi would see as a sign that the bright hour of salvation had dawned at last. The parade of the prophets continued onward to Christmas, each of them having caught from the Eternal Mind isolated gleams of the rapturous truth. And always, no matter what phase of the Incarnation or what attendant circumstance it was theirs to announce — always, inseparably blended with the divinity of the announcement, was the human loveliness of the Mother.

True, the Messianic prophecies would have been great without their association with Mary; but they could not have been great so tenderly. Even when the words made no mention of the Mother, the thought of her was there — and the words were sweeter on that account. And precisely what raised the prophet Isaias, among

the whole company of the prophets, to a supereminence all his own was that his message rang with the full, explicit wonder of Mary: "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son; and His name shall be called Emmanuel." The audacious grandeur of that! The significance of that name, meaning nothing less than "*God-with-us,*" telling in one word of the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation!

The People Misunderstand

No prophecy could have gone straighter to the core of the truth. Yet, apparently, the people to whom heaven had entrusted the mighty secret failed to receive it for what it was worth. That the Messias would come, and come of a daughter of Israel, was a national conviction: the prophecies, to that extent, had taken hold. But that the Messias would be born of a Virgin — this, the most intimate prediction of all, unequivocally clear, fell on deaf ears.

It is of record that Jewish maidens sought marriage for the chance they thought it offered of bearing to the world its Saviour; and, accordingly, Jewish mothers could not help feeling disappointed over every birth

that did not produce a boy. It was a religious disappointment, cutting deep. The prophets had left no room for misunderstanding: the Promised One would be a Son. And in this setting, where motherhood was prized and honored, it was one day told through her neighborhood that St. Anne had become a mother. She had prayed for this through years of barrenness, continuing the prayer beyond the normal age for childbearing. And now, in her old age, she was privileged above every other mother of her generation.

Yet this birth, for which St. Anne had hoped against hope, could not have failed to be. This child of hers was a beautiful inevitability. Born pure as the Angels, and sweeter, she would have drawn their every vote as the prize baby but One, of all time. Sent upon earth against the malice of hell, she was to grow, unimpaired, to the fullness of womanhood; because, simply, heaven needed a Queen, and the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity needed a Mother.

But to speak of her birth is not enough. Already nine months previous to that, from the moment she began to be — and including that moment — on the instant she took

life in the shelter of her mother, not an Angel in heaven, nor all the Angels together, could match the triumphant splendor of her soul. God's love, even then, inhered in her being as fragrance in a flower; and Satan knew he was not dealing with Eve now. He could not get within a million miles of her indestructible loveliness. He could only quake before this unborn babe who was, to him and his cohorts, "terrible as an army set in array." Her Immaculate Conception threw down the gauntlet, was omnipotent warning of things to come: a divine dream budding toward fulfillment. For that child was born to be a Mother.

St. Anne's Baby Is a Girl

But did the neighbors who dropped around to congratulate St. Anne, hide the pity they felt because the infant was, after all, only a girl? *Only a girl:* only the only creature of all the human race whose soul no taint of sin ever touched, whose body even the tomb would be unable to hold from the angels; the imperishable flower of how many prophecies; her Creator's terrifying answer to Satan; in a word, such an immeasurable "disappointment" as would give

of her flesh and blood that God might walk the earth as One of ourselves!

Did St. Anne, for that matter, realize *all* she held in her arms? Did she realize that, because this baby was hers, she would become the most revered grandmother in history? Perhaps she did; probably she did not, since Mary herself was to kneel in lovely surprise at the Annunciation. But you may be sure St. Anne had no regret that she had been blest with such a birth. Whether she knew the divine reason or not, it imposes no strain on the imagination to picture her as sensing the superiority of her Mary and as willing, if need be, to argue the fact up and down and across Palestine. How could an infant be the especial pet of the Blessed Trinity and its own mother fail to glow with some of God's pride at what she beheld? How could a mother take such a one to her heart, surrounded by Angels, and her lullabies not catch some of their ecstasy? And, in truth, what a day for heaven it was when this mother, her voice filled with the yearning of the prophets, first told the child at her knee of the promised Messias, and saw the innocence of wonder on that little face!

The child grew to the readiness of maidenhood. Her growth had about it a finality and secret grandeur, as of stars moving on schedule. All the while the world paid no attention. It was too busy wondering of whom the Messias would be born. For the traditional hope of brides in the Chosen Land had never been stronger, now that the "seventy weeks" of years were drawing to their close. But the general tone of expectancy left untouched the humble dreams of "the handmaid of the Lord." Content to forgo every other ambition but that of heeding the divine whispers in her soul, she had early vowed a life of virginity. She was a woman apart. Indeed, she has every right to be called in full though reverent candor, the Sweetheart of the Holy Spirit. She was all God's. From the time the use of reason had been hers, she prayed as naturally as Angels sing. And heaven, gazing down upon the daughters of men, recognized a Queen. Then could the Creator look down from the resplendent ranks of His nine choirs, through a brilliant maze of stars, to find on earth a supreme delight: the adoration that radiated over creation from the small heart of one girl. Every

throb of that immaculate heart invited the advent of the Messias. Every prayer on Mary's lips held the desire of four thousand years. And God would not long refuse the world now — it was His all-holy joy to anticipate the touch of those pure lips on His.

God Dreams of His Mother

The Mother for whom the Creator had waited out the centuries was ready. She had been His eternal dream. Long before the prophets had announced her, before the earth had taken shape from nothingness or the hills of Bethlehem stood up from their valleys, the Son of God had lovingly anticipated His Mother. His words lie majestic in Holy Scripture, with a foreknowledge that pictures the future as already accomplished: "The depths were not as yet, and *I was already conceived:* neither had the fountains of water as yet sprung out. The mountains with their huge bulk had not as yet been established: before the hills *I was brought forth.*... And My delights were to be with the children of men."

He might, of course, have shown Himself to the children of men as the Commander of heavenly armies, surrounding

Himself by the glitter of drawn swords in display of His power. He might have walked, unescorted, into the lives of men, a Saviour blazing forth His Divinity. He might, to be sure — except that He had a more endearing way. He would invite this sinless maid to mother Him, the Eternal. He would come as her Babe.

The Annunciation

The invitation was given without pomp — with just that serene independence of time and circumstance which marked it as of heaven. Did it, in fact, come in the solitude of night, as popular tradition would seem to have it? Whether by night or by day, the solitude was, however, complete. The unhurried greatness of the message stole into the world when all around the kneeling figure of a solitary girl a nation slept, or might as well have slept. She was enough. The message wanted no other magnificence than her presence. She had the appeal of innocence, she had the sweetness of youth; and every throb of her young heart was awake to the glory of God.

Suddenly, in that little room at Nazareth, she was not alone. An Angel hovered there.

She looked up at the heavenly distraction, to hear breath-taking words.

"The Eternal God," the Angel was saying in effect, "has chosen you from among women. Would you be His mother?"

Had she heard aright — she who had dedicated her youth to the contemplation of the All-Perfect, she who knew as well as any Angel, Who God is? How, then, could this be? Who was she to have this overwhelming invitation directed to her? *She* from among all the centuries of women! The look of wonderment which it was Gabriel's privilege to see at that moment, was the most beautiful that ever lighted a human face.

He answered it. Courteous of her bewilderment, he repeated, explained, left no doubt. Then appeared a question in her eyes, the candor of which went to the Heart of God like the thunderous adoration of His nine choirs. The inviolable strength of perfect purity was in her words. "How shall this be done," she asked simply, "since I know not man?"

God's reply was ready on the Angel's lips. She would remain a Virgin: but, under the breath of the Holy Spirit, her chastity

would flower to an Infinitude of Grandeur such as the history of motherhood had never known before, and never would know again. She had only to say the word, and the miracle would happen. God would obey.

She spoke that word. And at the sound of her voice, the first sanctuary lamp might well have been hung in that little room in Nazareth. Her motherhood had begun; the prophets were vindicated. The long-expected Birth was but a matter of months.

Those months were ecstasy to Mary. Nor was the ecstasy broken when she went to live with her saintly spouse. St. Joseph often prayed with her in silence. He understood, since he had himself been told by an Angel. He could see it, too — the truth of what the Angel had said — in the adoring intentness of this heavenly maid. Her every look spoke to him of the Unborn; and he knew he was not worthy to live in his own house.

God Knows His Man

St. Joseph was God's own man to companion the sacredness of Mary. And that in itself was another defeat for Satan, that a descendant of Adam could be found

whose purity of heart qualified him for that divine environment. Reverent, gentle, faithful, he belonged there. He stood between the world and the Virgin-Mother, to guard her adorable Secret. He made a home for her in which she could give herself over, undisturbed, to the divine business that was her sole delight. He spoke never an unnecessary word, anticipated her every domestic need, and — kept his place in the background. He worked and prayed, prayed and worked; and rested from his labors in the heavenly silence of her presence — a silence full of desire for the music of a little Voice. And in this sublime expectancy, did the devoted carpenter perhaps plan as a masterpiece of his craft the making of a crib? To have concentrated the love of his great soul upon such a task would harmonize with everything we know of the foster-father.

But if such a crib did stand in some corner of that humble home, a birthday present from Joseph to Mary's Child, it was destined to remain empty of its intended little Occupant well beyond His Birth. For as the longed-for time approached, "a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that a census of the whole world should be

taken." That decree stirred all the solicitude in the heart of the carpenter. He knew what it would mean; and he looked upon the living Tabernacle of his God with deep lines of worry on his face. The law was demanding that this delicate Mother-to-be journey to Bethlehem. It was her ancestral home as well as his, the City of David; and it was there they would have to register in person. The Emperor had so stipulated: excuses were out of the question. Inconvenience of travel, the condition of a woman with child, would receive no consideration. Nothing, the Emperor had decreed, overshadowed the importance of obeying his wish. The Emperor ruled the world.

Mary and Joseph Go to Bethlehem

So it happened that in submission to the decree Mary and Joseph set out. Every person who met them should have knelt at their passing; but there was none of that. Unheralded, they arrived at the destined town, with but one thought: Jesus. It was late in the day, and they went at once to the inn. There the keeper broke their hearts. Joseph implored with desperate urgency,

but the place was filled. What did this insistent traveler expect an innkeeper to do? After all, others had come to be registered, had to have lodging, too. Let the man take his companion — how absorbed and youthful she looked! — but let him take her elsewhere.

There was little else to do. And out of the confusion of the village into the growing darkness of the night, St. Joseph escorted the Queen of Creation. Step by step he accompanied her into the sweet tranquillity of the pastures outside the town. Stars were coming fast into the waiting sky — stars which had once looked down upon David in these very fields. How often out here, tending his flock, had he not longed for this holy night! And now, his own village had closed its doors to his Dream of dreams. Lamps were going out in home after home in Bethlehem: the village was settling down to sleep. The inn stood dead in the night. Was its keeper, perhaps, wondering what had become of the unusual couple he had turned away? Could he ever forget the angelic sweetness of the young girl's face? the appealing solicitude of the man, with the paternal beard and a voice so gentle? Not that it made any difference now.

The Mystery which could have transformed his inn overnight to the world's most hallowed spot, which could have drawn pilgrimages thither from the ends of the earth, was moving through the starlight, among the shepherds and their flocks, over hill and valley, to a stable-cave.

Silence, from over all that countryside, listened at the cave. The call of the shepherds' horn had long ceased. The herds lay huddled in sleep. The shepherds sat watching, their figures calm with starlight. Presently it came — a signal — the cry of a Babe. And the night became alive with a brightness greater than day; the sky was atremble with music, a broad reverberant expanse of voices. The shepherds stood up, in the exultation of that moment more resplendent than kings: "The glory of God shone round about them." It was the pent-up joy of a hundred prophecies at last bursting free. It was jubilee breaking out of heaven on the wings of multitudinous Angels, thrilling on their lips, shining from their faces, pouring the magnificent blend of song and splendor into the world, down upon the plains around one cave. For sheltered away in that cave, before the last

echo of the brilliant "Gloria" had faded back to starlight, a foster father was smoothing down the straw of a manger; and in a mother's arms lay the little Cause — under His first kiss.

Motherhood had met the kiss of Divinity, and would henceforth wear a luster not all its own. It would still know the curse which Eve had brought upon it; but it would share in the emanation, the spiritual glow, that touched the figure of Mary from the Divine Babe.

The Angels Desire a Mother

That Mother, who was subject to nothing of the curse, has brightened the lot of every other. The Madonna at the Christmas crib is a truth which speaks to the heart as nothing else on earth can; and every mother in the world awakens once again this sweetest memory we have. The world respects her for more than her own sake: she is a reflection of Mary. Indeed, from the day that heaven received the sacred body of Mary in triumph, no mother can face the world, her child in her arms, without a spiritual glory upon her brow reflect-

ing the crown of a queen. The Angels had quickly seen at Bethlehem what they, as motherless spirits, wanted — and merely bided their time. The fifteenth of August is the annual reminder, a holiday for human pride!

Of the loveliest Tabernacle the Son of God was ever to know on earth, we have no relic. But, despite her Assumption, this glorified Mother is ours still; the Angels could not, would not, take her protective sweetness out of the world. It is everywhere about us. It pervades the very air we breathe. It sings like a melody in the soul. It shines through every sorrow. In her lofty rôle as Queen she has not forgotten us: she is too much the Mother. Her solicitude remains; it will always remain; it was promised us from the cross.

Mother of the World

There can be no orphans in this world. No grief, no separation from family — nothing need close out from the soul the tender presence of Mary. Loneliness may call to her from the most deserted spot on earth, and the very call will make the wilderness bloom with joys of home. Agon-

izing cries may rise from forsaken battlefields, but there can be no cries she does not hear and pity to the depth of her maternal heart. Philip Gibbs has left us a touching record of this. As eyewitness, he reports the magical change that comes over the wounded and dying when they hear from a chaplain the whispered names of Jesus and Mary. "The old faith," he says, "which has survived many wars, many plagues, and the old wickedness of men, was still full of consolation to those who accepted it as little children, and by their own agony hoped for favor from the Man of Sorrows Who was hanged upon a cross, and found a mother-love in the vision of Mary, which came to them when they were in fear and pain and the struggle of death."

That was written of another period than the present, but it still holds. The divine sympathy of Jesus, the motherliness of Mary, are as everlasting as heaven, and wider than the world. Who can say, in late years, how many millions have bled away their youth, how many thousands have drowned or crashed to their death, with those blessed names the last on their lips? Who can tell all the desperate, con-

centrated fervor of perfect contrition that speaks to God in those words, and opens to the closing eyes of these heroes the grandeurs of infinite, unending peace?

Everybody Loves Christmas

I can never forget a certain Midnight Mass for this reason. The congregation had just risen to hear the dearest Gospel of the year, and it was easy to remember, from the absence of young men in that packed gathering, that war had once again caught the nation in its toils. It was announced, first, that the Holy Sacrifice in progress was being offered for all those absent ones. Simple as the announcement was, it touched some deep universal chord in the audience. A handkerchief here and there was in evidence, but the tears seemed to be tears of happiness, and they seemed all to be the tears of mothers. Then was read the age-old story of Christmas as recorded by St. Luke, and the look that came on those thousand faces without a single visible exception causes one to ask why the proud should feel so superior toward honest sentiment.

Nor did the listeners need to be told afterward — the joy on their faces said they knew — that many an absent boy this night would be listening to the same divine story at the Midnight Mass in some camp or other, on some ship at sea; or perhaps somewhere under the open sky would be looking up through the blackout into the same clear stars which lighted the way of Mary and Joseph to the cave.

Now, that congregation was told nothing it did not know. Yet it thirsted for the information it took for granted: that the Birth at Bethlehem had spread a new glory around the world; that Christmas had made this night sacred; that hearts everywhere, in spite of war, were beating to a common joy; that youthful aviators were only flying the skies that Angels flew when the Divine Babe was born; that the shepherds themselves had not been more affected by the message of those Angels than were millions of the young, wherever they might be, whose eyes shone with memories of the same good news, first heard at a mother's knee back in an American home. The scene at that Midnight Mass has left a haunting impression. Nothing could more vividly have demon-

strated the necessity of Christmas for the human race. It was a triumph of sorrow rejoicing.

Christmas Has Changed the World

It is not an accident that the Divine Child has become the center of human history. There is no questioning the fact. The calendar proves it; our records all bear the date B. C. or A. D. There is no alternative. His sacred appearance in the world forms the Great Divide. The centuries before had looked to His coming; the centuries since, have not outgrown the memory. Just as the prophets would not permit men to lose hope, the Church will not let them forget. In her countless temples of worship she houses Him, she erects statues of His Mother. She traces upon the windows of those temples stained-glass reminders of the Annunciation, the stable at Bethlehem, the model home of Nazareth, and all the other scenes of His human life. She circulates holy cards of Madonna and Divine Babe into millions of homes. She has enriched art galleries, filled libraries, with lofty representations of Jesus and His Mother. She has set their loveliness to music. The

Church stops at nothing to keep their heavenly names in the hearts, on the lips, of the faithful. She has made the "Hail Mary" one of her children's favorite prayers, Christmas their favorite feast. And she sends out from her worldwide network of belfries, thrice a day, the musical call of the "Angelus"; so that every hearer on all the earth may be reminded that "the Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary . . . ," and, in the reminder, experience anew the joy of the splendor that burst from a star, of the song that fell from Angels' lips, nineteen hundred years ago, over the Birth of the Child Who was God.

God's respect for motherhood has fixed a grandeur upon human life that will be there when the sun and stars go out. It has lifted our prestige to a divine dominance in the universe; has made our planet the very chariot of creation's King. It has so ennobled our nature that every man may stand upon the earth, a fellow-child of Jesus Christ, and ride the circuit around the sun as on a hallowed merry-go-round, in the rollicking spirit of Christmas. It even means that over all heaven, sharing the full, indivisible, unified Divinity of Father and

Holy Ghost, reigns a sacred Figure we know; and that beneath that supremacy of the Blessed Trinity, but higher than the highest Angels, shines the fair and glorified form of her who gave our race its Incarnate God.

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